

## LABOUR LEADER

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*Sir, all this service*

*Have I done since I went*

SHAKESPEARE, *The Tempest*

While all know Kalaithanthai as an industrialist who built up a textile empire, few would know that he was in his early days a labour leader and fought for the cause of the immigrant Tamil labourers who worked in the tea and rubber plantations in Ceylon. It is all the more remarkable when we remember that he neither owned a plantation nor was a labourer in any plantation. None of his family were in any way connected with the plantations. Impelled purely by altruistic motives, he took upon himself the responsibility of fighting for the cause of the helpless workers.

### 1

In the course of colonizing South East Asia, the Europeans established hundreds of rubber and tea plantations and sugarcane fields in the countries they colonized. They set up rubber plantations in Malaysia, tea and rubber plantations in Ceylon and sugarcane fields in Fiji and other islands, and they needed a large workforce. They got them mostly from India. And these Indians, thousands of men, women and children, who had been attracted by the prospect of making money, had to eke out their livelihood in miserable conditions. With no hopes of getting back to their motherland, they suffered untold hardships. The European owners were slave drivers. Gandhiji's disciple, Rev. C.F. Andrews, drew attention to the sufferings of the workers in the sugarcane fields in the Fiji islands. His account stirred the anger of the people in India but they could do little. The great Tamil poet Subramania Bharathi wrote a moving poem, *On the Sugar-cane Fields*, on the desperate plight of the emigrant Indian workers.

The lot of the Indians working in the plantations in Ceylon was no better. Young Kalaithanthai's heart went out to the suffering workers. His work as a correspondent in *The Morning Leader* had brought him face to face with the conditions in the plantations, and he decided to devote himself to the welfare of the workers. He was hardly twenty-two and he threw himself into their cause with all the fervour and impetuosity of youth.

The tea and rubber plantations in Ceylon are concentrated in the central mountainous part of Ceylon and are the main source of wealth for the country and the backbone of its economy. All these plantations belonged to Europeans then and most of the workers were Tamils, who had come in the hope of 'making their fortune'.

The recruitment was done by brokers who were known as *kanganies*, who worked on a commission basis, getting anywhere between 10 and 45 rupees for every recruit. The *kangany* would come to India every six months and visit villages in search of prospective workers. He had the gift of the gab and would paint a glorious picture of Ceylon, calling it a *paradise* on earth. Many villagers would be tempted, but how could they go to Ceylon with no money? The *kangany* would offer a loan for the journey and for immediate expenses. The people would be taken in and come to look upon him as a saviour. They would start on their journey with high hopes. And what a shock they had when they landed in Ceylon! They would be known as 'coolies'. They were denied even civil rights. They could not get citizenship in Ceylon and were no better than slaves. They had to work for 12 hours a day on very meagre wages. The *kangany* would have a stranglehold on them, as they would be unable to repay his loan. Unable to bear the suffering, many of them would run away, but they would be caught and punished. There was no chance of their going back to India. There was also the horrible custom of branding the coolies, as cattle were. And punishment was heavy for even petty offences. Fines and flogging were common.

The degrading and disgraceful conditions of the plantation workers roused

Kalaithanthai to fury. He started a movement to champion their cause. He wrote articles in newspapers, exposing the fraudulent ways of the *kangany*, whom he described as the embodiment of deceit, and the inhuman conditions in which the plantation workers toiled. Once in the clutches of the *kangany* there was no hope of release for them. Kalaithanthai brought to light the injustice done to the workers. He showed how their suffering began even at the quarantine camp at Mandapam. He organised protests and produced reports on the conditions of the workers.

The articles and reports of Kalaithanthai were naturally embarrassing to the British government in Ceylon, and they began inquiring into his antecedents. The Bureau of Investigation was asked to keep a tab on him. The British owners of the plantations resented Kalaithanthai's interference and came to regard him as their enemy.

### 3

Kalaithanthai's articles, however, did have some effect. There was a public outcry and the Madras government was forced to appoint a Commission in 1913 to enquire into the conditions of the Indian workers in Ceylon and Malaya. It was a two-man commission. One member was Marjorie Banks, an English I.C.S. officer and the other was Khan Bahadur A.K.G. Ahamed Tampi Maraikkayar Sahib Bahadur, a Muslim millionaire. The Commission was to examine at first hand the conditions of the plantation workers in Ceylon and Malaya and submit its report and recommendations.

The Commission's report came out after four years in 1917. It went the way of all such reports: nobody paid any attention to it. There was an exception. Kalaithanthai studied the report carefully and thoroughly, not missing even trivial details. He felt that it was imperative that he should write a rejoinder to it. He had not been a news correspondent for nothing. He had become a writer when he was twenty and knew the

power of the pen. He had a good analytic mind and the patience to wade through details and had great power of expression. And, most important, he had the rare courage to speak out. The rejoinder shows Kalaithanthai's mettle.

What stands out in the rejoinder is Kalaithanthai's fearlessness. He freely expressed his views, fearing neither the British plantation owners nor the British government. What prompted him was his concern for the poor workers. It was the same concern that was later to impel him to start Sree Meenakshi Mills.

The rejoinder appeared under the title '**A Whitewashing Commission**'. That was how Kalaithanthai described the Commission. He made a point-by-point criticism of the report. The criticism was based on an independent study of the conditions in the plantations, which he had made.

Kalaithanthai made several charges against the Commission. First they did not know how a report should be written. It required a certain courage to say this of a team with an I.C.S. officer for a member. Secondly, there was no indication that the Commission, which had been appointed to enquire into the conditions of the workers, had ever met them or taken the trouble to ascertain their views. Again, of the two thousand and more plantations, the Commission had visited only six, and there too, they had not made any attempt to ascertain the views of the workers. Next, the report was silent on the role of the *kanganies*. Further, the Commission had tried to gloss over the poor wages of the workers by taking into account only the wages given for pruning, which was a seasonal job. And its observation that the cost of living in Ceylon was less than that in India was contrary to the truth.. Kalaithanthai pointed out twenty-four such defects in the Commission's report. The full text of the report is given in *Appendix 1*. He did not stop with this. He himself made a firsthand study of the conditions of the workers and brought out a detailed report.

Many newspapers in India and Ceylon published his report. There was universal praise for Kalaithanthai's selfless interest in the workers' welfare. In its editorial on March 7, 1917, *The Hindu* wrote that the Madras and Indian governments should accept the well-authenticated report of Karumuttu Thiagaraja Chettiar and reject the Marjorie Banks-Ahamed Tambi Marakkayar report. On the same day Mrs Annie Besant wrote in *The New India*: 'A study of Thiagaraja Chettiar's report along with Marjorie Banks-Ahamed Marakkayar's will force the conclusion that the latter need not have gone to Ceylon to make such a report.' There was an editorial on the reports in the next day's issue also. Following is a part of it:

It would be good if some private individual with an interest in social service could go to Malaya and acquaint us with the truth about the conditions of immigrant labour there. It is clear that the Commission appointed by the government had met just a few willing plantation owners. The Commission reports that the condition of workers in Malaya is better than in Ceylon. If there had been someone like Mr Karumuttu Thiagarajan in Malaya to give us the true picture, he would have given the lie to this part of the report also.

*The Indian Patriot* also wrote on the same lines.

The next year Kalaithanthai appeared before the Immigrant Labour Committee in Ceylon and gave evidence on the sufferings of the Indian workers. It is given in *Appendix 2*.

The effect of it all was that for several years Kalaithanthai was the acknowledged leader of the labour movement in the plantations in Ceylon. As a result of his efforts, the workers gained many rights. Branding was given up. They came to have voting rights. Their working hours were reduced from twelve to eight. It cannot be denied that Kalaithanthai was mainly responsible for the mitigation of the sufferings of the workers. Thanks to him, the workers came to have a measure of respect and dignity in their life.

Kalaithanthai spent seven years of his early career fighting selflessly for the cause of workers. He had no patience with the latter-day labour leaders, who, he felt, were careerists and opportunists interested only in personal advancement and not in the welfare of the workers.